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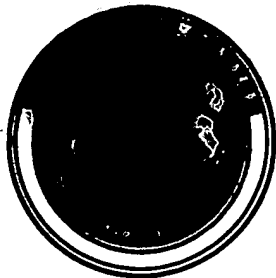
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Liquid transfer devices

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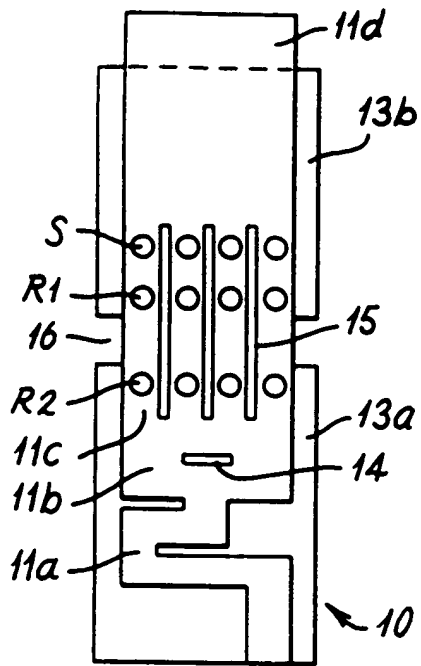


Fig.1a

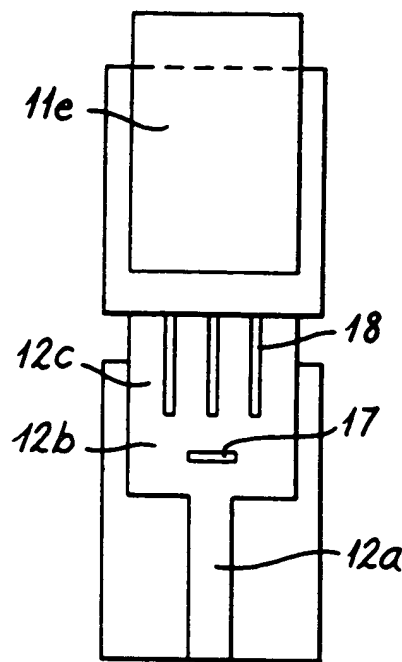


Fig.1b

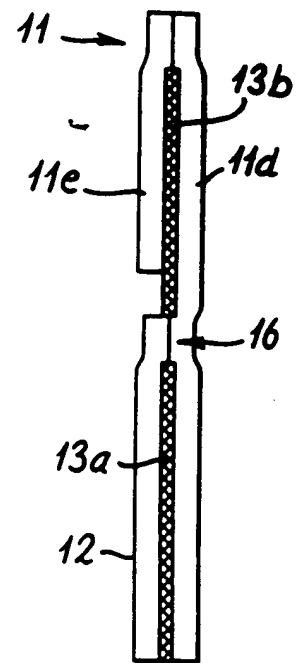


Fig.1c

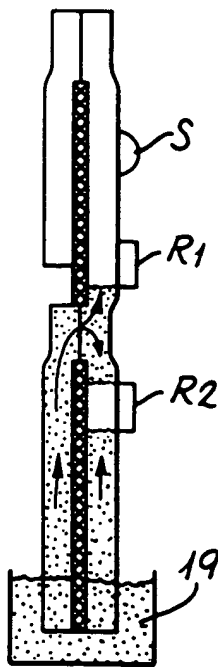


Fig.1d

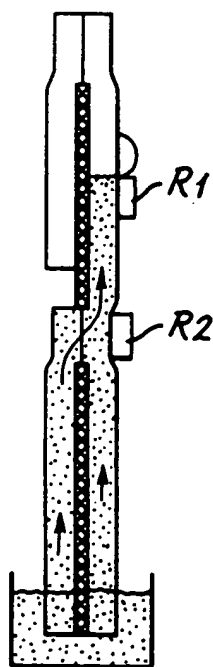


Fig.1e

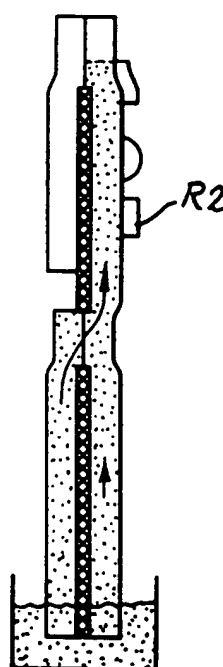


Fig.1f

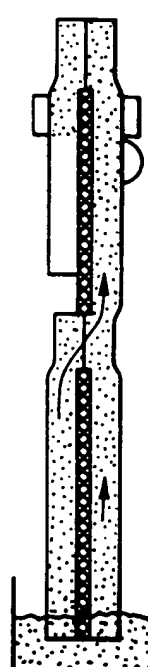


Fig.1g

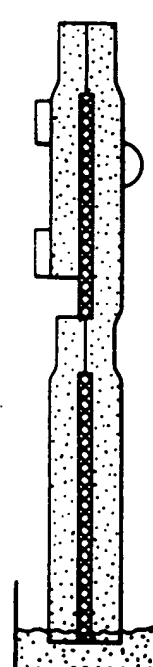


Fig.1h

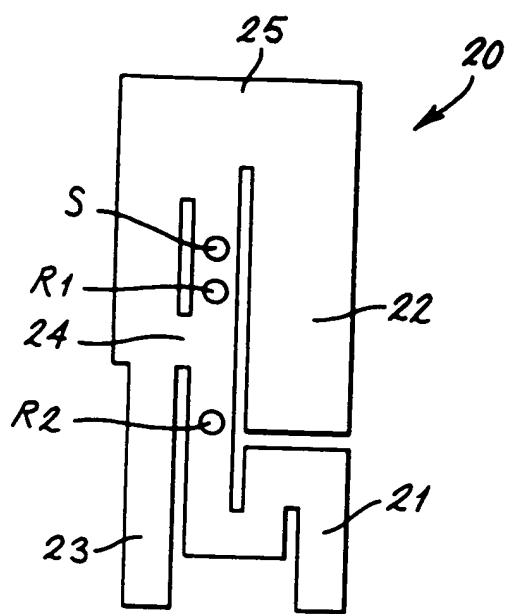


Fig. 2a

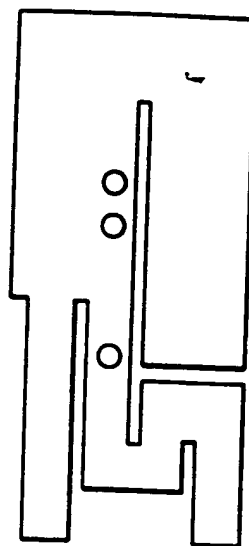


Fig. 2b

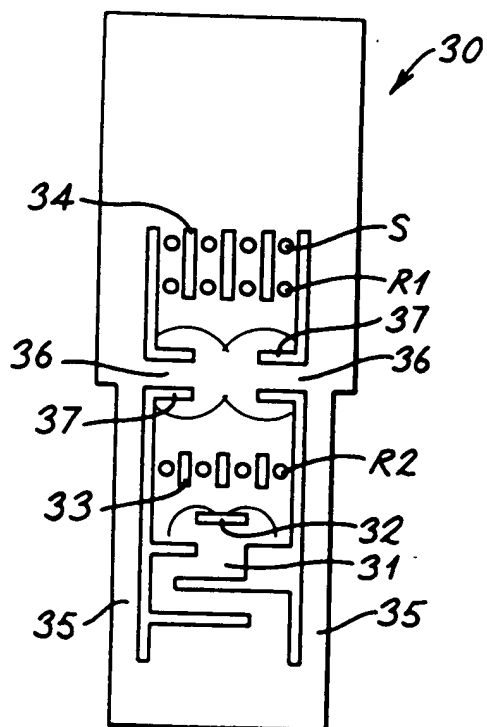


Fig. 3a

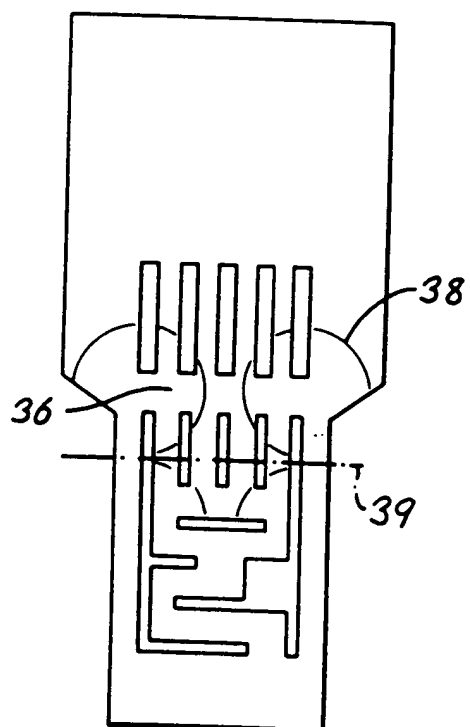


Fig. 3b

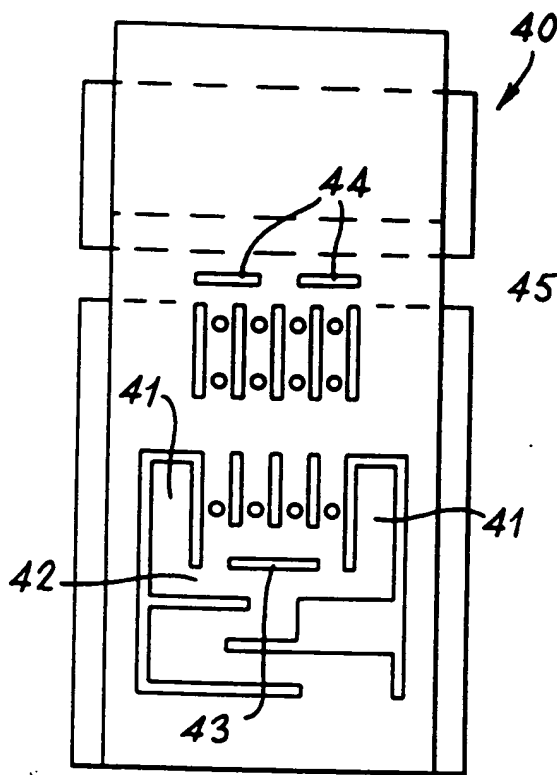


Fig. 4a

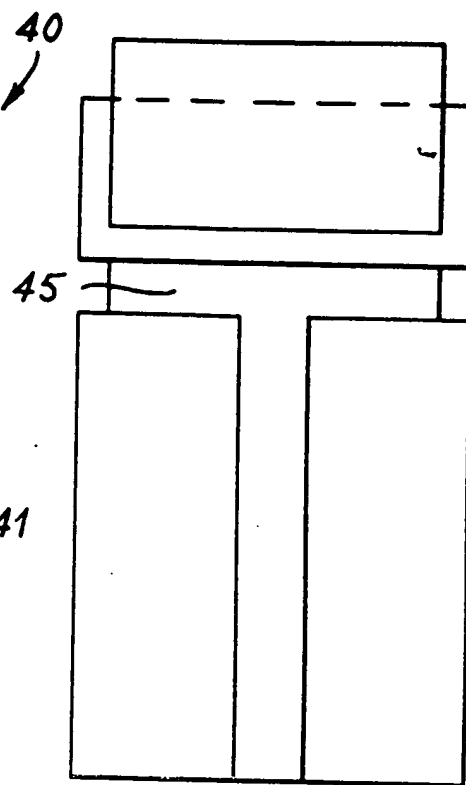


Fig. 4b

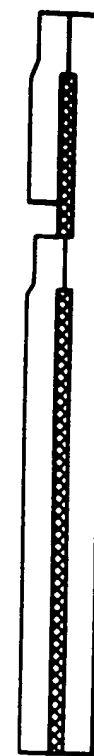


Fig. 4c

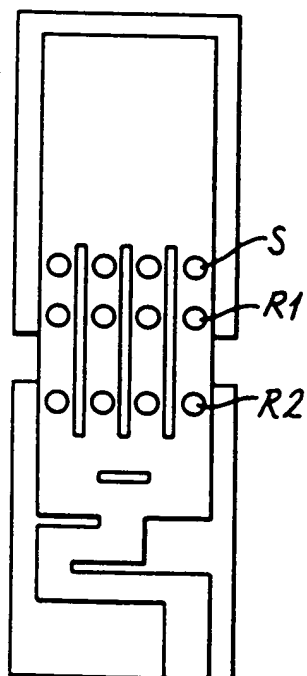


Fig. 5a

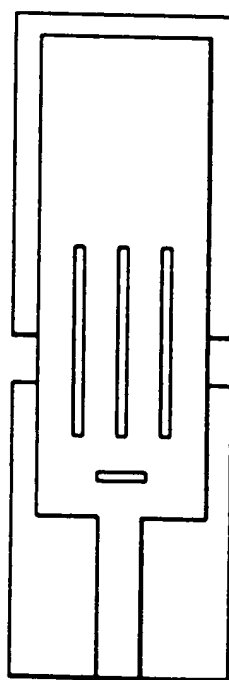


Fig. 5b

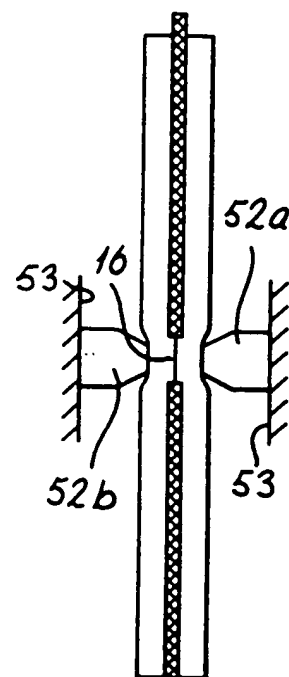


Fig. 5c

LIQUID TRANSFER DEVICES

There is considerable commercial interest in simple, disposable, self-contained devices for performing biochemical diagnostic assays in extra-laboratory situations. Ideally such devices should avoid any need for complex manual procedures, such as a timed sequence of reagent additions to an analyte, and so be suitable for use by lay persons.

According to Patent Specification WO90/11519 such devices can be of a kind comprising first and second liquid flow channels of porous materials leading from a respective pair of channel ends to a common site, which channels are operable to transfer liquid by capillary flow to the common site in sequentially timed manner following simultaneous application of the liquid to the pair of channel ends.

However, while Specification WO90/11519 describes a variety of particular devices of this kind, they are largely suited to carrying out a single analytical procedure. In contrast there are many situations in which it is desirable to perform plural procedures simultaneously and there would be advantage in a multiple device of integrated form making available such a performance.

The present invention provides an improved device of the above-mentioned kind which is particularly, but not exclusively, of the subsequently mentioned multiple integrated form.

According to the present invention, the improved device has the first and second channels formed by respective mutually superposed layers of porous material separated by a liquid impermeable barrier except for at least one selected area over which the layers are held in fixed engagement for liquid flow therebetween.

In multiple integrated form the improved device has a plurality of first and second channel pairs formed by common respective porous material layers.

The invention is further described below, by way of example, with reference to the accompanying drawings, in which:-

Figures 1 to 5 respectively illustrate different forms of device which accord with the invention and/or are explanatory of the operation of such a device.

5 The device of Figure 1 is of generally rectangular sheet overall form, denoted at 10, and is respectively illustrated in front, rear and side views at (a), (b) and (c).

The device has four pairs of first channels 11 and second channels 12 respectively formed by front and rear layers of porous material, which layers are separated by a liquid
10 impervious membrane 13.

The first channels 11 commence from one end of the device in a common portion 11a of narrowed tortuous form. Thereafter the channels assume a broadened rectilinear form having successive portions 11b, c and d. The portion 11b has partway therealong a
15 liquid impermeable bar 14 extending transversely across its central region and portion 11c has three uniformly spaced, parallel, liquid impermeable bars 15 extending therealong to define four discrete first channel portions. Each of these last portions has located successively therealong two reagent regions
20 R2 and R1 and a sample application region S.

The membrane 13 is in two portions 13a and b. The first portion 13a extends against first channel portions 11a, b and c up to a point beyond reagent zones R2, but not as far as reagent zones R1. The second membrane portion 13b extends against first
25 channel portions 11c and d from a point just before reagent zones R1 in the former, but without engaging the first membrane portion. There is accordingly a transverse gap 16 between the membrane portions.

The second channels 12 commence from the same end of the device as the first channels in a common portion 12a of narrowed rectilinear form. Thereafter the channels assume a broadened rectilinear form having successive portions 12b and c. These last portions are similar to the first channel portions 11b and c and have respective bars 17 and 18. However, the discrete second
30 channel portions 12c terminate at the gap 16 where they respectively engage the first channel portions 11c.
35

It will be noted that, as shown, the first channel portion 11d can effectively continue into a portion 11e formed as a part-layer on the other face of the device, with the portions 11d and e being mutually engaged beyond the end of membrane portion 13b.

In practical construction, the porous material is suitably of filter paper such as Millipore (Trade Mark) AP25, and the bars within this material are formed by excision to form slots or by impregnation of wax or other liquid impermeable material. The membrane portions are of any suitable sheet plastics material bonded by adhesive with the porous material. The porous material layers are also bonded together, where they engage at gap 16, and between portions 11d and e, but in such a way as to allow liquid communication by capillary action.

The reagent regions R1 and R2 each contain lyophilised reagent materials impregnated into the porous material. For a typical immunoassay, R1 would be an enzyme-labelled antibody, and R2 a colorimetric substrate. The sample region S would incorporate antibodies, to the antigen of interest in the sample, immobilised onto the porous material. Each discrete channel may contain similar or different reagents and be related to similar or different samples.

In a typical use of the device, a biological sample, such as serum or urine, is applied to the sample regions S and antigen in the sample begins to bind to the immobilised antibody. The lower end of the device is then immersed into liquid 19 and this flows up the first and second channels as shown by Figure 1(d). Flow through the first channel portion 11a will take longer than that through the second channel portion 12a because of the tortuous form of the former. In the channel portions 11b and 12b liquid flow is similarly deflected around the respective bars 14 and 17 so as to arrive at the associated discrete channel portions 11c and 12c uniformly in each layer. Liquid flow in the second channels will reach the gap 16 first and passes into the first channels to continue upwardly and downwardly in the latter.

When this upward flow reaches region R1 the associated reagents are reconstituted and carried along with the upward flow. Also the downward flow proceeds to meet the initial upward flow in the first channels, these flows saturate the channels when they meet and then continue as an upward flow carrying along the reconstituted reagents from regions R2. These reagent movements are indicated by Figure 1(e).

Reagent R1 reaches the sample region S and a portion binds to the immobilised sample. The time between this binding and the earlier application of the sample to the region S allows the sample to incubate. Unbound material is washed away from region S by the continuing upward liquid flow. This phase of operation is indicated by Figure 1(f).

Further flow then causes reagent R2 to flow through and react with that portion of reagent R1 bound at the sample region as indicated by Figure 1(g). An insoluble colour is produced, the intensity of which depends upon the amount of the antigen of interest in the sample.

Flow then continues through the sample region, which stabilises the colour, and into the first channel portions 11d and e which serve as a waste reservoir. Flow stops when this reservoir is saturated and the operation is complete. This final phase is indicated by Figure 1(h).

While there is reference above to first channel portions 11c,d and e, it will be appreciated that beyond the gap 16, where the first and second channels are in liquid flow communication, the portions are common to both channels.

In any event, the device of Figure 1 is of a beneficially compacted form by virtue of this inter-channel flow communication being effected between superposed layers of porous material in which the discrete first and second channel portions of a multiple device can be respectively formed.

However, the specific form of Figure 1 can be improved. A significant facet of the operational procedure is the separation of application of the two reagents at the sample region. The

extent of this separation is determined, at least in part, by the width of the second channel portion 12a because this determines the volume flow rate of liquid through the second channels. If this flow rate is too large relative to that in the first channels, the former flow will be dominant at the gap 16 and the reagents R2 will move too slowly. If, in compensation, portion 12a is unduly narrowed, the time taken to saturate region 16 can be unacceptably long.

This difficulty can be avoided by use of a channel arrangement analogous to a balanced electrical bridge circuit as explained with reference to Figure 2.

Figure 2(a) shows a planar device denoted generally at 20 and involving a single pair of first and second channels formed by a single layer of porous material. In comparison with Figure 1 it will be seen that the planar device has a first channel 21 which starts from one end in a tortuous manner, and then proceeds rectilinearly along the device to its other end where it turns transversely and downwardly into a widened reservoir area 22. In its rectilinear part this channel has reagent and sample regions R1, R2 and S. A second channel 23 of rectilinear form starts from the same end as the first channel and passes in separated manner alongside the latter, except for a transverse interconnection 24 with the first channel between regions R1 and R2, and another 25 at the other end of the device. At the interconnection 24 the on-going second channel changes in width, by widening as shown, in order to modify the on-going resistance to flow relative to that in the preceding channel portion. The relevance of this will be appreciated further below.

Operation of this device will be largely evident from that given above for Figure 1. Sample is applied to region S and the lower ends of the channels immersed in liquid. Upward liquid flow occurs, but with a delay in the tortuous first channel portion, whereby flow occurs from the second channel, through connection 24, into the first channel. As before, reagents R1

and R2 are reconstituted and carried to the sample S in sequence, with waste products continuing to the reservoir 22.

A difference in this case is that the second channel flow additionally continues separately beyond connection 24 to pass
5 through connection 25 to the waste reservoir.

Now hydraulic flow and pressure are analogous to electrical current and voltage, with hydraulic resistance to flow equating with electrical resistance. The hydraulic situation in Figure 2(a) can then be equated with a Wheatstone bridge circuit
10 with the two channels representing the two sides of the bridge, and the connection 24 representing the cross connection in the bridge circuit. More specifically, the hydraulic resistances in the two channels up to and then beyond connection 24, represent the electrical resistances of the four arms of the bridge circuit
15 and, when these resistances have the same proportions about the cross connection, there is zero flow across this connection. This is desirable for operation of the device of Figure 2(a) in that flow from the second channel cannot dominate that in the first channel following saturation below the connection 25.

20 Figure 2(b) illustrates a simplification in which the first and second channel portions above the connection 24 are not physically separated.

Figure 3 illustrates devices similar to those of Figure 2 in being of planar form from a single layer of porous material, but
25 in this case they are also of multiple form involving plural pairs of channels.

The device of Figure 3(a) is denoted generally at 30. It has first channels 31 of similar form to those of Figure 1 in having a tortuous portion connected to a rectilinear portion which first
30 has a transverse deflector bar 32 and then longitudinal channel separator bars 33. Thereafter the first channels rejoin in a common portion which is transversely necked in, as discussed below, and broadened again into a further portion with longitudinal channel separator bars 34.

The second channels 35 are deployed on both sides of the first channel array in an effective duplication of the unilateral arrangement in Figure 2(a), with cross connections 36 to the first channels intermediate reagent regions R1 and R2. These connections are defined by transverse channel separating bars 37 projecting from those which separate the first and second channels longitudinally. The bars 37 are of lengths such as to cause flow from the second channels to progress into the first channels, upwardly and downwardly, in a uniform manner.

Operation of this device will be evident from that described above for Figures 1 and 2. However, it is to be noted that when the cross connections 36 and the preceding channel portions are saturated, there is to be zero flow in the connections. In these circumstances reagents R2 are carried upwardly through the necked first channel portions, along curved streambands, and there is a tendency for the reagents to become diffuse as these bands become longer.

Figure 3(b) shows this last device modified in similar manner as Figure 2(b) relative to 2(a) by omission of the upper first and second channel separating bars and, in addition, the cross connection bars 37. At the same time the gap at connections 36 between the upper and lower channel portions is narrowed and the flow deflector bar 32 is widened. In the result the opposite flows towards reagents R2 have similar circular wavefronts indicated at 38 which will meet to form, at saturation, a temporary stagnation line 39 of generally rectilinear form across the device. The reconstituted reagents R2 will then move from this line uniformly upwards with no significant risk of diffusion.

The bridge-like forms described above need to be fully wetted in order to balance effectively. The device 40 of Figure 4 is modified relative to that of Figure 3 to facilitate this result.

Figure 4 in fact involves two layers of porous material, somewhat like Figure 1, and so is shown in front, rear and side views respectively at (a), (b) and (c).

The front layer has a form corresponding to Figure 3(b) except for two additions.

5 The first addition involves the provision of two reservoirs 41 connected at 42 with the opposite sides of the first channel common portion which incorporates the transverse deflector bar 43. These reservoirs delay movement of reagent R2 during saturation of the bridge from below, particularly in relation to the relatively modest flow contributions from the second channels, and ensure uniformity of flow across the
10 thickness of the porous material, which otherwise may tend to saturate at different rates on opposite surfaces. The extent of the time delay depends on the area of the reservoirs 41 and the size of the connections 42.

The second addition involves the provision of two further
15 deflector bars 44 above the uppermost ends of the discrete first channels. These bars serve to apply flow uniformly to the channels in a downward direction and avoid a need for these channels to be unduly narrow.

This last flow is provided by the rear layer 45 which is of
20 T-shape to convey liquid up to and across the front layer behind the deflector bars 44. This flow serves to ensure adequate saturation of the bridge from above.

The rear layer can also provide a separate portion to connect at the top of the device with the waste reservoir and so further
25 compact the device as in Figure 1.

Turning lastly to the device of Figure 5, this is a modification of that of Figure 1 but which employs the benefits of a bridge.

As with Figure 1, the device of Figure 5 is shown in front,
30 rear and side views respectively at (a),(b) and (c). Figure 5 in fact shows one difference, namely, that the waste reservoir does not continue from the front layer to the rear, but instead the second channels at the rear continue upwardly, after transverse engagement 16 with the first channels, into a common portion.
35 The result, as seen in side view, is to form an effective bridge

whereby, at saturation above 16, there is no flow between the first and second channels.

5 Front and rear layers are joined at 16 using a 'hit and miss' glue-pattern to allow liquid to flow through the joint, or preferably, by pressing the two layers together using compression members 52a and 52b, shown in Figure 5(c), which may form part of, or be attached to, a device housing 53.

CLAIMS

1. A device for performing biochemical diagnostic assays comprising first and second liquid flow channels of porous material leading from a respective pair of channel ends to a
5 common site, which channels are operable to transfer liquid by capillary flow to the common site in sequentially timed manner following simultaneous application of the liquid to the pair of channel ends,

wherein said first and second channels are formed by
10 respective mutually superposed layers of porous material separated by a liquid impermeable barrier except for at least one selected area over which the layers are held in fixed engagement for liquid flow therebetween.

2. A device according to Claim 1, comprising a plurality of said
15 first and second channel pairs formed by common respective layers of porous material.

3. A device according to claim 2, wherein the plurality of channels of each layer of porous material are formed by absence of porous material therebetween.

20 4. A device according to claim 2, wherein the plurality of channels of each layer of porous material are formed by application of an agent to render the material therebetween impervious.

5. A device according to any preceding claim, wherein the layers
25 of porous material are engaged at said selected area by adhesion.

6. A device according to any preceding claim, wherein the layers of porous material are urged into engagement at said selected area by at least one compression element.

7. A device according to claim 6, wherein the said channels are
30 at least partially contained within a housing, and each said compression element is supported by the housing.

8. A device according to any preceding claim, whereby said liquid impermeable barrier comprises a sheet of plastics material.